



**Testimony before the Public Safety and Security Committee**

**Re: S.B. 162 AN ACT CONCERNING FEES CHARGED BY INDEPENDENT CONTRACTORS  
THAT PROCESS CRIMINAL HISTORY RECORDS CHECKS.**

**March 3, 2022**

Senator Osten, Representative Horn and members of the Public Safety and Security Committee. My name is Nicole Bettinelli, I am a Licensed Master Social Worker employed at Greater Hartford Legal Aid (GHLA) and I am testifying regarding Senate Bill 162, *AAC Fees Charged by Independent Contractors that Process Criminal History Records Checks*.

Greater Hartford Legal Aid (GHLA) provides free civil legal services to low-income individuals in Hartford County. GHLA is committed to helping eligible individuals apply for pardons of their criminal records through its GHLA Pardon Equity Project (PEP).

For those of you that are unaware, there are many steps to applying for a pardon, the first being getting fingerprinted so applicants can obtain their criminal history record from the State Police Bureau of Identification. Typically clients go to their local police station, pay \$15-\$25 and get a fingerprint card, which they mail along with their criminal history record request form and their \$75 money order or their request for a fee waiver, to SPBI. Fortunately, last year the legislature passed Public Act 21-32, codified at C.G.S. 29-11, which allows for a waiver of the \$75.00 fee to obtain a criminal history record report, for eligible low-income pardon petitioners. The legislature acknowledged the barrier this fee presented and understood the need for the \$75 fee waiver, which allows low-income individuals to apply for a pardon. It is because of the fee waiver that many people have access to apply for a pardon and are not excluded due to their income.

Sadly, there are inconsistencies at police departments throughout the state that continue to negatively affect low-income individuals. Depending on the police station an applicant goes to there may be different fees and policies in place. For example, I worked with a client who took the bus to a police department 40 minutes away from her home that charged \$15 instead of the \$25 that other, closer police departments charge, because \$15 was all the client could afford. Further, some police departments turn clients away from getting their fingerprints done in person and require that they pre-enroll online through the CCHRS system. This requires individuals to pre-pay the \$75 fee, plus a \$2.25 service fee for the criminal history record report with a credit or debit card. In some instances, there is also an additional \$13.25 fee for a federal criminal history report. There is no fee waiver provision for these on-line pre-enrollments, service fees, and federal criminal history reports. \$88.25 + a service fee, or even \$75 + a service fee, are prohibitively high costs for low-income people. Many of the clients that I work with also do not have a credit or debit card, or access to the internet. In these cases, not only is income a barrier but technology can also be an obstacle.

Since June 2021 our office has spoken to over 185 individuals who are interested in seeking a pardon. A handful of those individuals were not eligible for our services either because of their geographic location

or their household income. However, more than 90% of the people we have worked with and have accepted as clients have depended on fee waivers. Many of our clients have even struggled to pay the \$15-\$25 fingerprint fee, saving up for weeks or asking friends and family for loans. One of the most common reason our clients apply for a pardon is for employment purposes. Our clients are either working multiple low wage jobs, are unemployed trying to find a job, or have been denied jobs due to their criminal record. To ask them to pay the \$15-\$25 fee is difficult and unfortunately, no waiver is currently available for that. For my clients, spending \$15-\$25 on fingerprints so they can apply for a pardon that may not even be granted, is a big ask.

S.B 162 allows for a limited “convenience fee” of \$30 for independent contractors who are administering the fingerprint process. It is not clear what constitutes a “convenience fee” but it appears to be in addition to the various other fees our clients are expected to pay. Clearly indigent individuals seeking pardons should have access to a fee waiver that applies to all associated fees including the “convenience fee” cited in this proposed bill.

Those that I assist with applying for a pardon often have struggled, but have really changed their lives for the better. Our clients have worked extremely hard to stay out of trouble, are upstanding citizens and have given back to their community. They have taken low wage jobs, or worked multiple jobs to support themselves and their families. The pardon process is long but for many, it is a chance at a fresh start and can lead to more opportunities for themselves and their families. It is a shame to think that a \$30 “convenience fee” could keep someone from advancing their education, moving to a better home, or being hired in a better job. Without a fee waiver, a “convenience fee” will be another unfair obstacle for an indigent person looking for a fresh start.

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